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**OPEN
WATER**
BATTLING SAN
FRANCISCO BAY

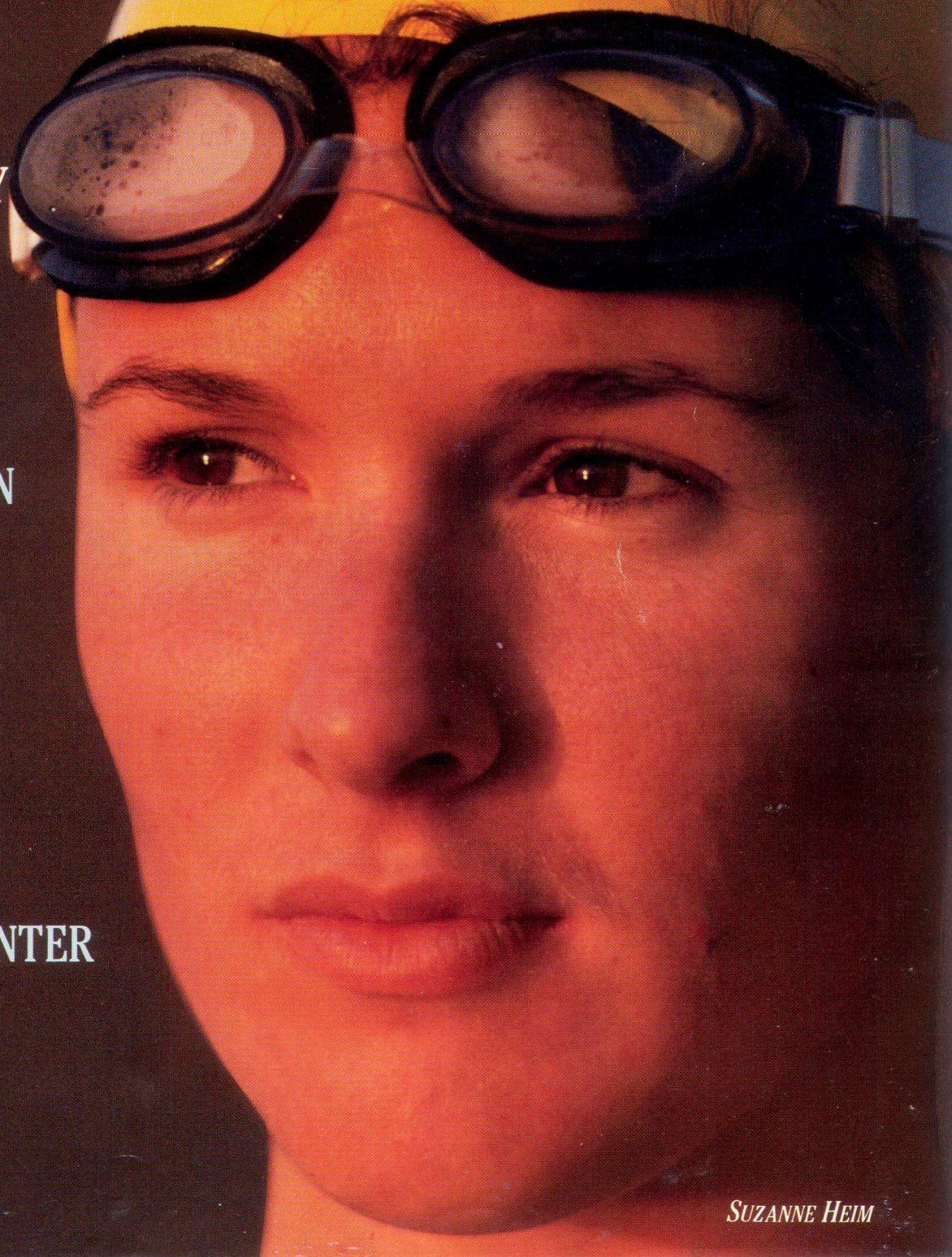
**CLIMBING
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**RUNNING THE
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**WOMEN'S
BODYBUILDING**

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SUZANNE HEIM

TAMING THE WATERS

Suzanne Heim has braved riptides, cross-currents, hypothermia—even an early brush with death—to claim nearly every open water swimming record in San Francisco Bay.

Sand and foam swirled and crashed around the little girl who just moments before was blithely chasing gulls and waves. The sea was in no mood to play. It was angry and had come to claim another child. It caught her, twisted her and tugged her under, the saltwater choking her cries for help.

"Mommy, mommy . . ."

Five-year-old Suzanne Heim was drowning. Then someone, somehow, reached in and pulled her out. Today, 20 years later, Suzanne retains a vivid memory of her terror and the struggle against the vast, powerful waters.

"I can still see it all so clearly when I close my eyes," Suzanne says with a slight quiver. "After

that, I never wanted to swim in the ocean again."

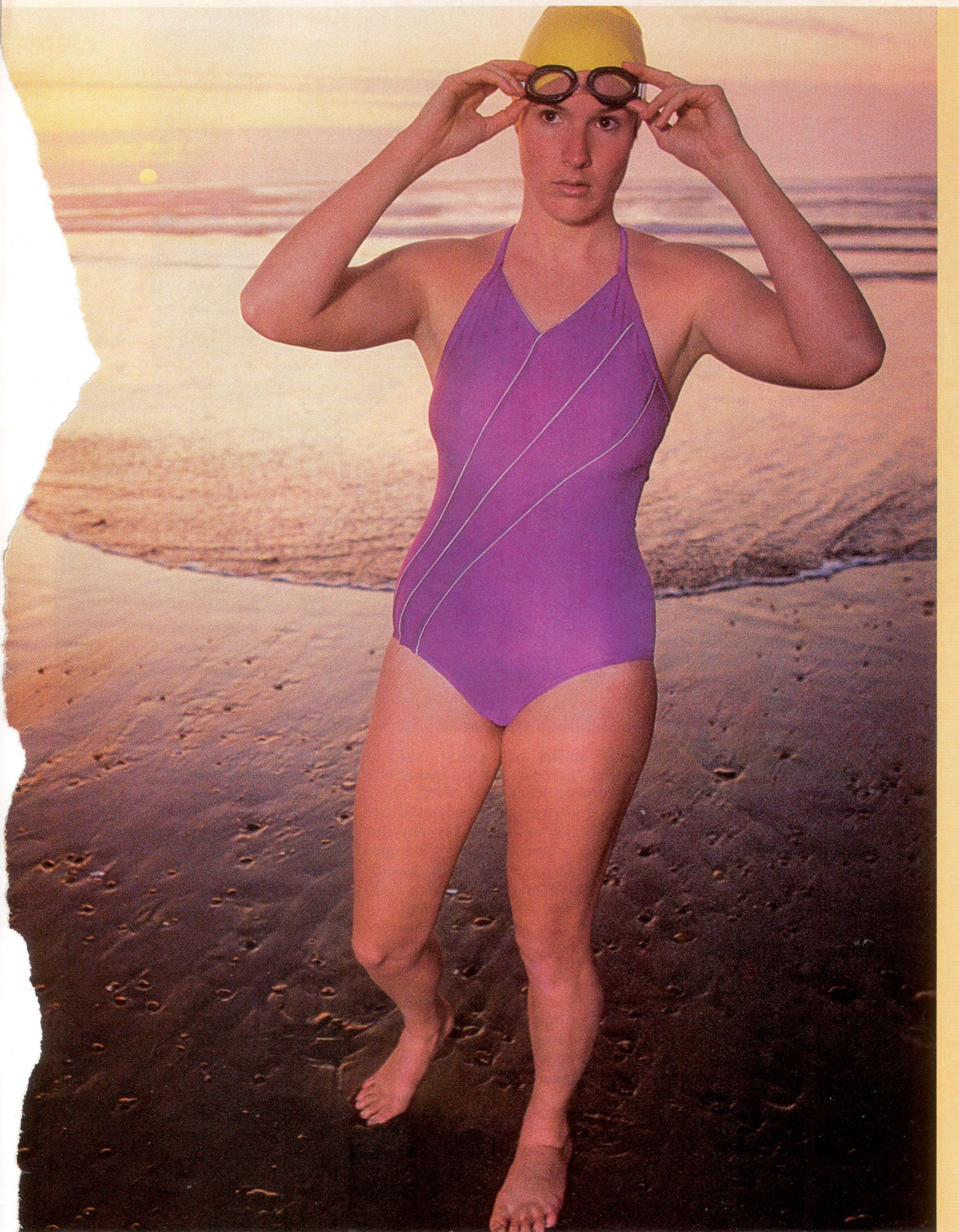
She didn't—for 13 years. And when she tried it again, it took a lot of getting used to. By then, she had moved from her native San Francisco Bay Area down the coast to San Luis Obispo where she attended California Polytechnic State University. All her friends there were avid body surfers, and she no longer wanted to put it off. She decided to learn to like the ocean.

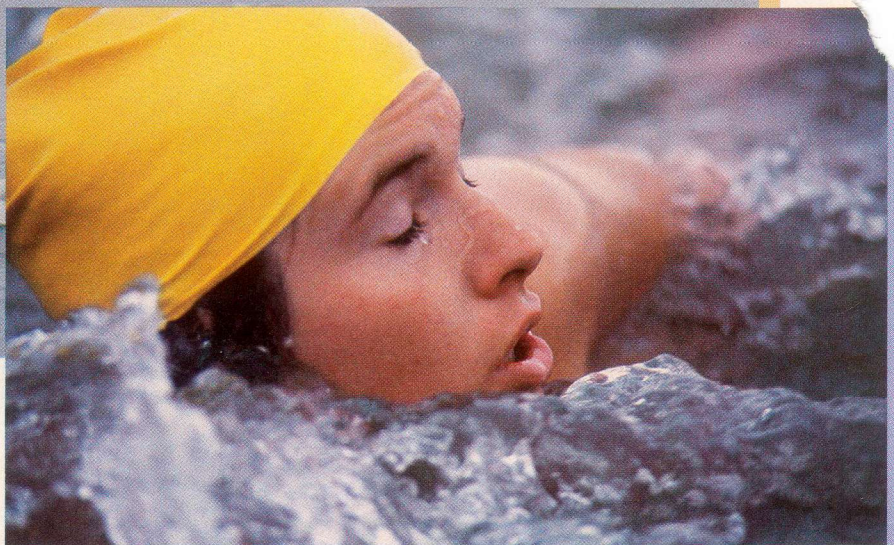
"Each time I tried to get into the water, I panicked—shaking, hyperventilating, the whole trip," she says, sounding disgusted with herself.

It was a little embarrassing. Her Cal Poly peers knew her as a great

BY LESLIE WECK







swimmer. She had founded the school's women's swim team and was a top competitor in the league. Suzanne, who'd been swimming competitively since she was seven, loved the water—but feared the ocean.

"I knew I was a strong swimmer. And I'd taught so many kids how to swim over the years that I knew the approach to getting beginners used to the water. But I just couldn't use it on myself. I finally had to coach a guy about how to help me. Does that sound stupid? I mean, I told him to let me stand on his feet out in the water and then gently pull them away, so that I was standing there all by myself. It was quite an ordeal."

Eventually, she learned to brave the blue-green waves. She found she liked it so well that she not only did as much body surfing as possible, she began competing in ocean races.

That open water odyssey started in 1977 and her progress was phenomenal. In 1979, she set the women's 10-mile national rough water record in Southern California. It was just the beginning.

"I'd found my niche," she declares. "I'd been getting bored with swimming back and forth in a pool. I always got overheated and the flip turns ruined my rhythm. But the ocean was cool, wide open and didn't have any walls. I could get a real good rhythm going and I felt like I could swim forever."

After graduation, she returned to her hometown of San Rafael, just north across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. She missed living on the beach, but soon the San Francisco Bay beckoned and Suzanne knew where her swimming would take her next.

"I have this adventuresome streak," she explains while sorting through scrapbooks and news clippings that tell her story. Her tiny house in the wooded hills of San Rafael quickly becomes littered with memorabilia she pulls from drawers and shelves. "When I came back here after college, I de-

cided I wanted to do swims no one had ever tried before."

Today she's known as the very best at swimming in the San Francisco Bay, setting record times and achieving many first-ever accomplishments. Highlights include:

- June, 1981. Suzanne is the first person ever to swim the 4.5 miles from Tiburon across the Bay to San Francisco. Her time is 2:13:52.
- June, 1982. She is the first to swim from prison to prison—Alcatraz to San Quentin—completing the 8-mile trip in 2:53.
- November, 1982. She becomes the first to swim the 10 miles from the Oakland Bay Bridge, out the Golden Gate Bridge and down the coast to Ocean Beach. Her time is 2:05:47. She sets three different records in the process.
- May, 1983. Suzanne competes in a half-marathon, *swimming* the first nine miles in 3:21 and running eight-minute miles for the fi-

nal four. She finishes 1751 out of 1755.

● July, 1982. Suzanne achieves her most incredible feat. She swims 27 miles from the Carquinez Bridge—a Bay inlet north of San Francisco—to the Golden Gate in 5 hours and 27 minutes.

● November, 1983. Suzanne becomes the only person ever to swim four times across the channel spanned by the Golden Gate Bridge. Midway through, she also establishes the fastest time ever—46 minutes—for a double crossing.

● January, 1984. She is the first woman ever to win the annual New Year's Day Alcatraz-to-San Francisco Swim, a 1.5-mile swim no escapee from Alcatraz ever survived.

To understand the physical challenge of her feats, just consider the effect of the cold water, which ranges from 47° to 58°. (The average swimming pool is about 75°.) In those temperatures many boating accident victims die of hypothermia within thirty minutes. But the cold never bothers Suzanne.

"She breaks all the rules in any medical book or survival guide I've ever read," says Dr. James Rappaport, an orthopedic surgical resident at the University of California at San Francisco who often accompanies Suzanne on her swims. "Theoretically, the body's set up to withstand changes of just a few degrees. After that, various chemical reactions in the body won't function correctly. Somehow, her body's better equipped to tolerate those changes."

Following the marathon Carquinez swim, Dr. Rappaport reported that Suzanne's temperature was so low it wouldn't register on his thermometer. Yet, amazingly, she was lucid and her vital signs no more abnormal than if she had simply run a few miles.

In addition to hypothermia, such dangers as cross currents, riptides, eddies and unpredictable waves plague swimmers in the San Francisco Bay. In fact these added perils make Suzanne feel that her accomplishments exceed those of other endurance swimmers who now race the 36 miles around Manhattan Island in New York.

"The West Coast has greater ti-

dal ranges—higher high tides and lower low tides—than on the East Coast," explains Wadell Johnston, a member of the Army Corps of Engineers whose specialty is San Francisco Bay. "On the East Coast the average change in tide elevations is 2 to 3 feet in 24 hours. Here, the average is about 6 feet and we often experience changes as great as 8.7 feet within about six and a half hours. Also unlike the East Coast, there are four, not two, distinct tide elevations. So the water is constantly changing and forcing its way in and out of that mile-wide opening at the Golden Gate.

"Under the bridge, you'll often find the water flowing in two different directions. Even at what we consider tranquil times, navigation across or through it is not very easy," Johnston concludes.

Yet Suzanne has swum outside that mouth, and across it, too, battling the current that's known for being several times stronger than the Mississippi River's.

"There's really no comparison between my swims and the ones on the East Coast," she claims. "Take Julie Ridge (the actress-athlete who swam twice around Manhattan Island) for instance. Swimming for 18 hours is impressive for anyone, but Julie is not a very strong swimmer. She swims about a 30-minute mile, and I do it in about 18 minutes. She couldn't survive in the Bay the way she swims. There are currents around Manhattan, of course, but they're nothing like what I had to fight under the Golden Gate. Besides, her swim was done in about 68° water. The warmest parts of the Carquinez swim were about 58°. And the Alcatraz swim is always about 47°."

Of all her feats, that New Year's swim from Alcatraz brought Suzanne Heim her greatest notoriety.

"It wasn't even my best time (she holds the women's record for the swim), but I beat a man, and so the press has made a big deal of it," she says shrugging. She told a local television talk show host that the reason she could endure the cold and beat the men was: "Women have this extra layer of—you know—fat."

Without prompting, she gives

the answer she would have *preferred* to give on TV: "The way I see it, women have everything going for them in sports. We can win by being the first woman, or we can win by being the first person. You're never going to hear about a man being the first man if he's beaten by a woman. When that happens, he's just second. I sort of feel sorry for the guys.

"I just don't have any personal vendetta against men. They're the ones who have helped and encouraged me. They're the ones organizing my swims and piloting the boats. So when I beat a man, or beat a man's record, I just put it all into the perspective of competition, you know, 'I won,' not 'I beat a man.'"

In fact, her biggest fans and supporters are the men of San Francisco's century-old Dolphin Club, perhaps best known for its annual "Polar Bear" swim to Alcatraz. It wasn't even ten years ago that this revered rowing and swimming club began allowing women to join. This year, Suzanne was elected to the club's executive board.

"I'm flattered that the guys are so supportive," she says. "All gaps between us—male and female, young and old—are closed by our common bond of swimming in the Bay."

And swimming is what Suzanne Heim does so well. She ignores the cold and has nothing but disdain for the possible dangers. Tidal currents and waves often threaten to sweep her into the sharp rocks along the shore, but Suzanne always escapes.

"People tell me my biggest fault is that I make it look too easy," she says. "I like to try new things, see new places. But I'm no daredevil. I'm not trying to tempt fate. Fact is, I'm very safety conscious. I never do more than one big swim every month and a half. It usually takes me that long to recuperate fully. I can't stress enough how much training and planning goes into all this. We plan for weeks—sometimes months. I study the tides and always listen to the advice of Mr. Johnston and all the oldtimers at the Dolphin Club. Some people think I'm too cautious, but I guess it's just that old fear again."



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and more
in the July/August issue of
ultrasport
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She feels certain things are imperative before a swim. Bay Traffic Control and the Coast Guard are notified. A motor boat, rowboat and men on paddle boards are always in her entourage. A doctor comes along on the really tough swims.

Those precautions taken, she can devote herself entirely to her passion.

"It's different from anything I've ever known," she says, staring out into nowhere as if reliving one of her swims. "I start feeling close to nature and close to God . . . I know it sounds sort of mushy. I don't think of myself as a really religious person, but during a swim I'll thank God for being able to . . . well . . . for being chosen to be out here doing this, for having this gift that puts me out here in this nice water and this beautiful environment. It's a real closeness, a bonding with nature."

But Suzanne doesn't like nature to feel so close to her. On the swim outside the Golden Gate, a sea lion followed her, as if it thought she was one of its own.

"That amorous sea lion just made me swim faster," she says, her eyes wide. "I don't trust any of those animals. I bump into things too, and wonder what they are. But a moment later I'm still alive and swimming."

It's this attitude—risk taking, but not crazy—that Dr. Rappaport considers Suzanne's biggest asset. She keeps her head and maintains her determination throughout her swims, he says.

"Mind over matter may be the only reason she can do it and others can't," says Dr. Rappaport with admiration.

But Suzanne's mind isn't so absorbed in her swimming that she doesn't have time for other things. She is not a full-time athlete. Out of the water, she works as a teacher of severely handicapped adolescents.

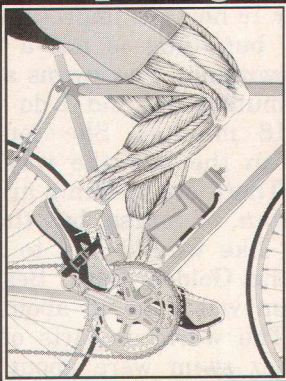
"Teaching those kids is similar to my swimming," she says. "It takes practice and perseverance. School can be as frustrating as swimming against the tide. My goal is to get the kids into a vocational workshop, but some of them may never progress that far. Sometimes, achievement means making sure there's no regression. Even

Running



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Cycling



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Heim works as a teacher of severely handicapped adolescents—a job she finds demanding, challenging, and often “as frustrating as swimming against the tide.”

that can be pretty hard work.”

In swimming, her achievements come from hard work, too. As a member of the Tampalpais Aquatic Masters Swim Team, she works out—in a pool—compiling three miles a day of short-rest intervals. Two or three times a week, she also swims about two miles in the Bay. Before a big swim, the whole workout will be doubled in distance.

“I don’t do anything else but swim for training. I really don’t have the time, say, for weights. And it’s obvious I’m not into health food.” She laughs and defiantly pops a sugar-coated lemon drop into her mouth.

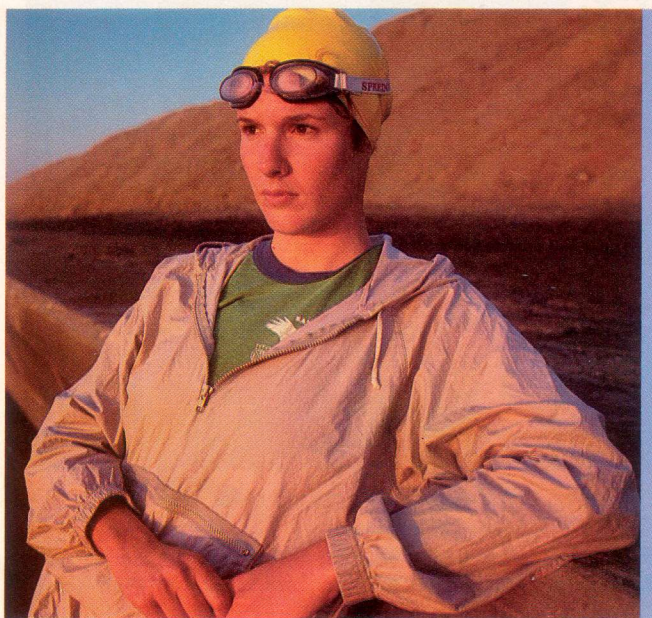
It’s Friday evening now. Suzanne’s job is finished for the weekend, and she’s looking forward to unwinding from a tough week at work. A dip in the Bay is just what she needs.

At the Dolphin Club, located at San Francisco’s historic Fisherman’s Wharf, Suzanne forgets her fatigue. She is at home here. Pictures of her are interspersed among those of the club’s founding

fathers. The records board is cluttered with listings for Suzanne Heim. After a few minutes of bantering with some of the men in the lobby, she steps out to the beach and heads for the water.

It has been overcast all day. There will be no dramatic sunset reflecting off the orange twin

towers of the Golden Gate Bridge. As the sky changes from grey to ebony, amber lights reflecting from Ghirardelli Square begin their dance in the ever-moving water of the Bay. The fingers of the Alcatraz searchlight reach into the cove where Suzanne slips into the black water.



Heim is not interested in repeating past swims: “... like explorers or mountain climbers, once I’ve conquered something, I’m ready to move on.”



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She swims high in the water using her powerful arms and shoulders. Elbows bent, she paddles rhythmically, counting every stroke.

Her mind slips into a creative mode, planning new and different swims and even more difficult courses to chart through the Bay, for she never considers a repeat performance.

"Why should I?" she said once. "Even if someone else beats my time, I'll always know I was the first. I guess I have a conquerer's attitude, like explorers or mountain climbers. Once I've conquered something, I'm ready to move on to the next thing.

"There are still plenty of things to do in the Bay. I'm interested in trying other swims too—the English Channel, of course, and others I don't want to mention because I don't want anyone else to take my idea and try it first. But those would take money and backing, and since swimming isn't full-time for me, that's not easy to come by."

Does she ever think about competing in the professional circuit instead of just doing solo swims?

"I might try the professional swimming circuit one day, but I don't want to get absorbed with it," she says. "Swimming can do that to you—I know, because that's what happened to me as a kid and I got burned out. Now, I think I've found my niche. I'm sure I'd be top-ranked, but I'm afraid competing professionally would be too much like work. I have a job. When I'm swimming, I'd rather just have fun."

Knobby-kneed men in baggy swim trunks emerge from the water, shaking off like wet dogs and disappearing into the Dolphin Club's old clapboard building. The chalkboard tacked to the door lists the water temperature at 51°. A barrel-chested man totters by mumbling that his watch-thermometer reads 48°.

"In the long run, my only real goal is to keep swimming for the rest of my life," says Heim. "I see these oldtimers at the Dolphin Club who are 80 years old and still going in every day. I hope 50 years from now I'll be like that." ■

Leslie Weck profiled Dave Scott in Ultrasport's March/April 1984 issue.